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THE POT OF GREEN FEATHERS.

BY T. G. ROOPER, ESQ., M.A., H.M.I.

INTRODUCTION.

As the title of this paper seems a little strange, a few words are necessary to explain its meaning. Some years ago I was listening to an object lesson given to a class of very young children by a pupil teacher who chose for her subject a pot of beautiful fresh green ferns. She began by holding up the plant before the class and asking whether any child could say what it was. At first no child answered, but presently a little girl said, "It is a pot of green feathers." Thereupon the teacher turned to me and said, "Poor little thing! She knows no better." But I fell a-thinking on the matter. Did the child really suppose that the ferns were feathers? Or did she rather use the name of a familiar thing to describe what she knew to be different, and yet noticed to be in some respects like? This train of thought led me to put together what I knew of perception, and the following is the result of my labours. The principal authority which I have closely followed is Dr. Karl Lange's *Apperzeption* (Neupert: Plauen); but I have derived much help from Herbart's "Psychology," Bernard Perez's "First Three Years of Childhood" (Sonnenschein), Romane's "Mental Evolution in Man," and the lectures of the late Professor T. H. Green.

What do we know of the outer world? Of that which is not self? Of objects? How do we know *anything* of the outer world? We receive impressions from it; a table feels hard, a book looks brown in colour, oblong in shape, and we say it is thick or thin. Are we simply receivers of these impressions—hard, brown, oblong? Are our minds inactive in the process of getting to know these impressions? Or are they active? Are lumps of the outside somehow forced in upon our minds entire without corresponding action on the mind's part? No! Our minds are not passive, the opposite is true. Through the senses

the mind receives impressions, but these contributions from the senses would not be objects of knowledge, would not be interpreted, would not be recognised, unless the mind itself worked upon them and assimilated them, converting the unknown stimulus from without into a sensation which we can hold in our thoughts and compare with other sensations within us. The mind converts the unknown stimulus from without into the known sensation. The outer world then is no more wholly the outer world when we know it. In our knowledge of the outer world there is always something contributed by the mind itself. The truth that the mind adds to and changes the impressions which it receives through the senses is illustrated by the very different conceptions which exactly the same landscape gives rise to in different people. The geologist can tell you of the strata, the botanist of the vegetation, the landscape-painter of the light and shade, the various colouring, and the grouping of the objects, and yet, perhaps, no one of them notices exactly what the others notice. A plank of wood, again, seems a simple object, and able to tell one tale to all, but how much it tells to a joiner, concerning which it is dumb to a casual observer. Or, again, visit as a grown man the schoolroom or playground where you played as a child, especially if you have not visited the scene in the interval. How changed all seems! The rooms that used to look so large have become dwarfed. The tremendous long throw which you used to make with a ball from one end of the playground to the other, to what a narrow distance it has shrunk! Yet the room and the ground are what they were. It is your mind that has changed. The change in your mind has brought about for you a change in the thing. Two people, then, or even oneself at different times of one's life, may perceive the same object without obtaining the same perception. Yet if the external object stamped itself on the mind as a seal or die stamps itself on wax, if the mind were as passive as wax, how could one object give rise to such different impressions? The difference must be due to the mind. Neither is it difficult to understand that this is so if we think what is the nature of the process by which the mind interprets the impressions which it receives from outward objects. When the mind receives an impression it refers it to a previously received impression that happens to resemble it. Thus every new impression is interpreted by means of old ones, and consequently every new per-

ception is affected, coloured as it were, by the already acquired contents of the mind, and nothing can be known or recognised at all until reference and comparison have been made to previous perception. My object to-day is to make this point, *perception*, which I admit is not easy, as clear as I can make it.

Perception of an object is not so simple a matter as at first it seems to be. "Oh," some one will say, "simple enough! A dog runs by me: through my senses I receive sensations of the animal, and I know that I see a dog." But this is no perfect account, for suppose two strange animals, say, a *Tasmanian Devil* and an *Ornithorynchus* come up the street together, my senses will make me aware of their presence, but if I have not learned anything about them previously, I shall not know, I do not say merely their names, but not even their exact shape and distinguishing marks. I shall say, "What in the name of wonder are they?" After a little looking at the strange pair, I should probably say, "One is a kind of bear, and the other is a kind of duck—a funny bear and a funny duck." Observe how the process of interpretation of my impressions goes on. Looking at the *Tasmanian Devil*, my impressions divide themselves into two classes: one set of impressions resembles impressions of bears, which I have previously received, while the other set finds nothing already existing in the mind to which it can attach itself. A kind of fight goes on between new and old. In the end the points of resemblance overpower the points of dissimilarity, and I judge the one animal (the *Tasmanian Devil*), in spite of much unlikeness, to be a kind of bear, in doing which I am wrong, as it is a kind of marsupial, and in judging, by a similar process, the *Ornithorynchus* to be a sort of bird, because of its bill, the mind equally makes a mistake, or, as we say, receives a wrong impression. There are, then, at least two parts in the process of knowing any object. First of all there is the excitation of our nerves, the nervous stimulus which makes us feel that we have a feeling, but does not explain what the feeling is; and secondly, there is the interpretation of the feeling by a mental action through which the undetermined and as yet unknown sensations or gifts of the senses are referred to known impressions and explained. It is about this act of mental assimilation of the impressions which we receive from external objects that I am treating to-day. I am not dealing with the question of

the origin of our impressions or the physiological basis of them, but with the growth of knowledge in the understanding by the working of the mind upon impressions. I think that modern psychologists have carried the analysis of this process sufficiently far for the results of their studies to be of practical value to teachers and parents. If we have to teach, is it not useful to know how the mind acquires knowledge? Take an object and set it before a child—say a fern. If the child has never seen a fern before, he knows not what it is. Impressions of it, he receives, but he cannot interpret them adequately. The botanist looks at the same fern, and not only sees and knows that it is a fern, but also what kind it is, how it is distinguished from other ferns, where it grows, how it may be cultivated, and all about it. The difference between the knowledge which the sight of the fern gives to the child and to the botanist does not depend upon the fern, but upon the state of mind of the two observers. The mind adds infinitely more to the impression received when it is the botanist's mind which receives it, than when it is the comparatively empty and uninformed mind of the child. What you can know of an object depends upon what you already know both of it and of other things. Philosophers and poets like Kingsley, Carlisle, Herder, Goethe, as well as educationists and psychologists, impress on us this truth: "In regarding an object we can only see what we have been trained to see."*

Impressions, then, have to be *interpreted* before they are clear to us. What is the easiest case of our interpreting impressions? Perhaps some such as the following. I see a man a little way off, and say to myself, "Here comes my brother." I have so often recognised my brother that the whole process of recognition goes on in my mind without any check or hindrance. The existing mental conception of my brother masters completely and promptly the fresh impressions which his present appearance makes upon me. The identification of the new and the old is uninterrupted, prompt, and immediate. The same speed and accuracy of interpretation is observable in his prompt and

* CARLISLE.—We can only see what we have been trained to see.

GOETHE.—We only hear what we know.

HERDER.—What we are not we can neither know nor feel.

ROUSSEAU.—We can neither know, nor touch, nor see, except as we have learned. In other words, the present impression produces only such an effect on the mind as the past history of the mind renders possible.

correct recognition by a good reader of the words and sentences in his book. Now take an opposite case, when it is hard instead of easy to interpret impressions. Suppose that we see something which is quite new to us. Suppose that the new impressions do not connect themselves with any previously assimilated impressions, and that, try as we may to refer them to something known, all is in vain. Then we feel puzzled: a hindrance, or check, or obstruction occurs in our minds. If the impression be very strong it may cause us to "lose our heads," as we say, or it may even overwhelm us. It is narrated that one of the natives of the interior of Africa, who was accompanying Livingstone to Europe, no sooner found himself on the great Indian Ocean, with nothing but heaving waters far and near in his view, than he became overpowered by the immense impression which this new experience made upon his mind, and flung himself overboard into the waves, never to rise again. Similarly at the Paris Exhibition, every evening when the gun is fired at the Eiffel Tower for the last time at ten o'clock it is not unusual to see a sort of frenzy among the visitors. Under the already strong impression produced by the electric illuminations, the luminous fountains, and the varied magnificence of the great show, some people seem to be seized with a veritable panic. Cries of admiration escape from some, and terror from others, followed by fainting, attacks of hysteria and prostration. Similar shocks occasionally prove fatal. Only in September last a little girl, four years old, was standing on the platform, near Sittingbourne, with her parents, who were on their way to Kent for the hop-picking season, when an express train dashed through the station. The little one was terror-stricken, and on the journey down screamed every time an engine came within sight or hearing. She dropped dead. The doctor ascribed death to the shock. To assimilate, then, a wholly new impression is necessarily a task of some difficulty, but the results are luckily not always so sensational as those which I have just described, and the following is an account of what more usually takes place.

If the new impression is not of a nature to make us feel strongly, and if it is isolated and unconnected with any other knowledge present to our minds, it probably passes away quickly and sinks into oblivion, just as a little child may take notice of a shooting star on a summer night, and after wondering for a moment thinks of it no more; if, however, our feelings are

excited, and if the object which gives the impression remains before us long enough to make the impression strong, then the impression becomes associated with the feelings and the will comes into play, in consequence of which we determine to remember the new impression, and to seek an explanation of it. With this object the mind searches its previous stock of ideas more particularly, comparing the new with the old, rejecting the totally unlike and retaining the like or most like, and in the end it overcomes the obstacle to assimilation, and finds a place for the new along with the old mental stores, thereby enriching itself, consciously or unconsciously—unconsciously in earlier years, and consciously afterwards. As an instance, I will suppose a child who has only seen blue violets finds a white one. Of his impressions of the white flower, some are new and some are old. The greater part are old, and lead him to infer that he sees a violet; but the impression of whiteness is new, and leads him to say "this is not a violet." Let us represent the characteristics by which he recognises a blue violet by the letters A B C D, the D standing for the colour blue and A B C for all the rest of the flower. When now he finds a white violet he again notes A B C as before, but instead of D, the colour blue, he receives the impression E, the colour white. Had the colour been the same, the impression of the flower would have coincided with previous impressions of violets, but the difference between D and E causes an obstruction or hindrance to this inference. The mind is not at ease with itself; the agreement of new and old only reaches a certain way. The old mental image and the newly acquired one don't exactly tally. What happens? In the two mental images now present and side by side in the mind, the new and the old (the new being more vivid, the old being more firmly established), the like elements, namely, A B C, strengthen each other, and unite to make a clear image, while the unlike elements, D and E, the blue and the white, obstruct each other, become dim, and at last obscured. The like elements in the end overcome the obstruction caused by the unlike, and beat them out of the field of mental vision, so that the two partly resembling impressions become blended or fused, as by mental smelting, into one. The two are recognised as one by the mind. The old appropriates or assimilates the new. The child finds an old *Expression* for the new *Impression*, and says to itself, "There is a violet."

Of course an impression need not belong to only one previously acquired impression or group of impressions; it may be connected with other groups. In this case it will be recalled to consciousness on more frequent occasions than if it belonged to one other mental state only. Hence a new impression, *if you give it time*, may find for itself many more points of attachment with previous impressions and ideas than it found just at first. For instance, I may visit Amiens Cathedral. Presently, when I have admired the building, I recall to mind various historic events that took place at the capital of Picardy. I remember that Julius Cæsar started thence to conquer Britain, that Peter the Hermit was born there, and that not far off Edward III. won the battle of Crecy, and that its name often comes up in the long hundred years' war. I think of the Peace of Amiens in 1802, the visit of Buonaparte to Amiens when he prepared to invade England, lastly of the German army in 1870. One impression calls up another, and the whole mass together strengthen and confirm and amplify the original impression. Isolated, these separate events are of less interest than when grouped together with my actual inspection of the ancient building. A wise man, therefore (if I may draw a passing moral), does not, if he can help it, decide or act in a hurry, under the influence of new impressions, but he will give them time to find points of connections with old impressions. What may to-day seem irreconcilable with truth, or honour, or happiness, may prove, when time has been allowed for assimilating, inconsistent neither with sincerity, nor good name, nor good fortune. Educationists, like Mr. Arnold, also, will continue to implore the public to simplify the studies of children, being convinced that unless the mind has leisure to work by itself on the stuff or matter which is prescribed to it by the teacher, the thinking faculty, on which all progress depends, will be paralysed, and dead knowledge will be a substitute for living. The mind will have no power of expanding from within, for it will become a passive recipient of knowledge, only able to discharge again what has been stuffed into it, and quite powerless to make fresh combinations and discoveries. Cram is the rapid acquisition of a great deal of knowledge. Learning so acquired, though useful for a barrister, has less educational value than the public believe, for it does not promote, but rather tends to destroy, the active and constructive powers of the mind.

When the mind has much difficulty to overcome in assimilating

a new impression, and hence has to spend time in so doing, it is benefited by the process, for, in the first place, the necessity of care, caution, and accurate observation, and much rummaging (if I may venture on the expression) among the ideas in the mind, tend to sharpen the senses, the sight, the touch, the hearing, and the rest, by making them sensitive to fine shades which might otherwise escape us, and, in the second, to amplify and enlarge meagre impressions. The eye, by itself, for example, only reveals to us surfaces. How then do we seem to see solid bodies? A baby stretches out its hand for the moon; how is it that what seems so near to him looks so far off from us? Because in our case the impressions conveyed by the eye are supplemented by the impressions received through the touch, and the two distinct sets of impressions combined together in the mind furnish us with the conception of a third dimension, besides length and breadth—viz., depth. The child who has not yet got so far as to have sufficiently often united the impressions derived from looking with those derived from touching and moving cannot rightly interpret the impressions which he receives. The moon seems quite close to him. Impressions, on the other hand, which pass easily into their place in the mind do not always tend to clearness of ideas. People may look at an object hundreds of times for a special purpose, and, beyond serving that purpose, get no permanent impression at all. Many people who look at a clock or watch many times a day cannot at once, when asked, draw from memory a dial with the hours correctly placed upon it. The process of assimilation may even mislead just as familiarity with an object may hinder accurate observation. Goethe says there is a moment in his life when a young man can see no blemish in the lady he loves, and no fault in the author he admires. A man in love may think that his Angelina sings divinely sweet though her voice is like a crow's. He interprets the impressions which he receives according to previously formed impressions. This leads us to see that it is not right to say, as we sometimes do say, "My senses play me false." The senses do not lie. The ear does not in the instance in question convey sweet sounds. The sense of hearing does not judge all. The ear conveys the sound truly enough. The judgment concerning the sound is made in the mind of the listener. This judgment it is which is falsified by prejudice, the lover being naturally pre-

possessed in favour of his mistress. So the wanderer in the graveyard by night in the uncertain light of the misty moon judges a tall gravestone to be a "sheeted ghost." His eye is not at fault. His judgment is. He receives the impression from the object truly, but he refers his impression to the wrong group or store of previous knowledge. He should refer it to optical phenomena, diffraction of light, and the rest. He actually does think of pictures and stories of vague appearances, of human shapes without human substance, and all the superstitious imaginings of poor frail human nature. His senses are not under control of his reason.

(To be continued.)

TRAINING LESSONS TO MOTHERS.

BY THE LADY ISABEL MARGESSON.

IN these days parents are, I think, anxious to be more in touch than they used to be with the education of their children. The revolution in the educational world brought about by the conviction that a knowledge of certain laws of physiology and psychology must underlie any teaching that is to be effective, is now an old story. The effect of this revolution has, however, been lessened by the fact that parents have as yet, to a great extent, been untouched by it. Without their intelligent co-operation, scientific education could not proceed to its full development.

Parents are now roused to feel that there is a mass of sound scientific knowledge, moral and physical, which has been accumulated, and which they can only neglect to their own and their children's future disadvantage.

But the process of being roused does not always leave clear notions behind it, and what parents now desire is to know how to put into practice the principles of the so-called "New Education;" for they are determined that their children shall profit by the many opportunities of fuller knowledge which are given at the present day.

The first step on the road to a practical application of these principles is to be convinced that they constitute the only scientific basis of education. We must study them with care and thought, and although it may sometimes be difficult to find time to read the works of specialists such as Herbert Spencer, Locke, Sully, Froebel, Pestalozzi, we shall, if we make the effort, be rewarded by learning how to fulfil our highest vocation of training our children to be "worthy in their generation."

The Parents' National Educational Union here offers us its help. It cannot, of course, supply the place of that individual